

## 1/ VOLUNTARY SECTOR

# Mencap tells C4 to watch its language

**Campaign** End the 'R' Word  
**Client** Mencap  
**PR team** In-house  
**Timescale** February-May 2010  
**Budget** £1,250

Learning disability charity Mencap teamed up with, and supported, Nicky Clark, a mother of two autistic daughters, after she heard Vinnie Jones and Davina McCall use the word 'retard' on *Big Brother's Big Mouth*, in January. In the broadcast, Jones told McCall he barely recognised her in a chicken costume because she 'walked like a retard' and McCall responded by laughing: 'I don't walk like a retard.'

Clark complained to Channel 4 that the word was offensive and asked for an on-air apology. When no apology transpired, she complained to Ofcom. The regulator ruled her complaint should not be upheld as the word had not intended to offend and was not at odds with the 'established nature' of *Big Brother*. Clark then appealed against the ruling twice.

### Objectives

- ◆ To raise awareness of the insulting nature of the word 'retard'
- ◆ To persuade Ofcom to reverse its decision.

### Strategy and plan

Mencap commissioned a poll of public attitudes towards the word 'retard'. The survey of 1,488 people, who were asked if they were Channel 4 viewers, found that three in five Channel 4 viewers found the word 'retard' offensive. It also revealed that only one in ten Channel 4 viewers thought it was OK to use the word as a joke.

The poll also provided an overview of



Appeal to Ofcom Protesters from Mencap

attitudes by region, allowing Mencap to target regional media.

Clark was trained as a spokeswoman alongside Mencap employees. The charity also mobilised supporters through social media and developed an online mechanism allowing them to send letters of complaint to the chief executive of Ofcom, and to their local newspapers.

People with learning disabilities were given the chance to express their views via press releases and statements.

### Measurement and evaluation

The campaign was covered in the *Mail on Sunday*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Independent*, on The Guardian and BBC websites, and in trade press. Clark contributed a 'comment is free' piece to The Guardian website.

The issue was discussed on Five show *The Wright Stuff*, BBC One's *Jeremy Vine Show*, and on BBC Radio Five Live. Regional publications covered the poll results.

**"I particularly like Mencap's use of research, which provided strong evidence for Channel 4 about its own audience's views"**

**Gemma Newman**  
 Director of strategic comms, Ice

complained to Ofcom after Davina McCall (left) used the word 'retard' on TV

### Results

More than 750 people sent emails of complaint to Ofcom, and the regulator replied saying it was reviewing the decision not to uphold the complaint. Clark and Mencap were invited to provide evidence for its Broadcasting Review Committee (BRC).

Davina McCall subsequently issued a public apology on her website.

The BRC decided that Ofcom had been wrong not to uphold the complaint, that the use of the word 'retard' was clearly capable of causing offence, and that Channel 4 had breached the broadcasting code.

This was the first time Ofcom had upheld an appeal to a complaint it had previously dismissed since the BRC was formed in 2009.

As a result of the campaign Channel 4 has agreed to meet with Mencap to discuss the issues raised.

Cathy Bussey

## SECOND OPINION



**Gemma Newman**  
 Director of strategic comms, Ice

Despite two previous knock-backs from Ofcom, Mencap rebounded, to communicate with Ofcom, Channel 4's audience, the wider public and Mencap supporters. It was an insight-driven, cost-effective public engagement campaign. It is also a great example of how one persistent member of the public, aided by intelligent PROs, can use PR to democratise their message and gain wider public support to turn around the attitudes of media channels, celebrities and viewers. I particularly like Mencap's use of research, which provided strong evidence for Channel 4 about its own audience's views, broadened the appeal of the campaign and enabled Mencap

to deliver a targeted, strategic, approach underpinned by tangible statistics.

The campaign's use of social media to connect with Mencap supporters and Channel 4 viewers mobilised a raft of media coverage. It is a brilliant example of how putting the campaign into the hands of the people who may have been particularly impacted by the event can really pay off.

Of course, the most strategic comms success that Mencap secured is its relationship with Channel 4, which enables it to influence future programming.

All in all, this is great PR using qualitative research and effective audience engagement. My only other recommendation would be to do further evaluation – I'm curious to see how Channel 4's audiences have changed their attitudes since the campaign.

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